

Analyzing Syntax

A writer's style is indicated by his/her choice of words and by the way he/she puts those words together: the sentence is usually considered the backbone of a writer's style. **Syntax encompasses word order, sentence length, sentence form, sentence function, sentence focus, and punctuation.**

I. A sentence can be studied for its **form**. Is it simple, compound, or complex?

- A. Simple: The boys were already in the classroom. (one independent clause)
- B. Compound: The boys were already in the classroom, and they began to work. (two independent clauses)
- C. Complex: The boys who were already in the classroom began to work (one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses)
- D. Compound-Complex: When the teacher walked into the classroom, the boys were already there, and they began to work. (two independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses)

*** The important point to remember when analyzing the sentence form would be the purpose of that form; what effect does it have on the piece of writing? For example, Hemingway's short stories about Nick Adams include mostly simple sentences with some compound and complex sentences. Hemingway is famous for this technique and its effect of emphasizing Nick's careful denial of his emotions when he returned from the war. When considering sentence form, you might ask yourself how the effect of a sentence would be different if its form was altered? For example, if a writer writes two short simple sentences in a row (i.e. I am frustrated. I am angry.), consider what effect it would have if he changed it to a compound sentence ("I am frustrated, and I am angry.")

*** It is also important to look at the combination of sentence types in a piece. Does the writer favor one sentence type? If most of the sentences are long, compound-complex sentences, a short simple sentence may draw more attention.

II. A sentence can be studied for its **function**. Is it declarative, interrogative, exclamatory, or imperative?

- A. Declarative: I need the sugar.
- B. Interrogative: Could you please pass the sugar?
- C. Exclamatory: I told you to pass the sugar!
- D. Imperative: Pass the sugar.

*** Assuming language is deliberate, consider why a writer might pose a question instead of making a statement. Why might a writer use an exclamatory phrase (they aren't used often). What can you, as a reader, infer about a speaker who uses many imperative sentences or exclamatory sentences? How would it affect your impression of that speaker, or even the mood or tone of the whole passage?

III. A sentence can be studied for its **construction and focus**. Is it loose, periodic, or balanced? Is there obvious repetition of a word, phrase, or clause? The way a sentence is constructed can change the focus of that sentence.

Note: Most sentences are a mix of these three, but it is helpful to be able to recognize their differences.

- A. Periodic: As long as we ignore our children and refuse to dedicate the necessary time and money to their care, we will fail to solve the problem of school violence.

Periodic sentences withhold the completion of the main thought until near the end. They carry high tension because the reader must wait until the end of the sentence to understand the meaning. In the example above, by stating the problem at the end of the sentence, the very existence of that problem is highlighted.

- B. Loose: We will fail to solve the problems of school violence as long as we ignore our children and refuse to dedicate the necessary time and money to their care.

Loose sentences state the main thought of the sentence near the beginning in an independent clause; then other independent clauses, dependent clauses, or phrases are attached. The tension is relieved right away, leaving the reader to explore the rest of the sentence. In the example above, by stating the problem (main idea) at the beginning, the end of the sentence emphasizes the causes of that problem.

- C. Balanced: The hope of a better life, the belief in the possibility of achieving it, and the success of those who came before makes us persevere.

A balanced sentence presents similar or antithetical ideas in a parallel form. In the example above, there is a series of parallel phrases (a noun followed by a prepositional phrase) which brings a sense of balance.

*** It is important to consider how the construction of a sentence deliberately develops or enhances meaning. How does it create emphasis? How would it shift the emphasis if a different construction is used? Why would a writer want to create a balanced sentence? What does giving equal weight to sentence parts accomplish? Repetition is another way writers achieve sentence focus. Purposeful repetition of a word, phrase, or clause emphasizes the repeated structure and directs the reader's attention toward its meaning.

IV. The effect of the punctuation in a sentence can also be examined.

- A. Parenthesis - used to "whisper" a witty aside to the reader; used for more confidentiality
- B. Dash - a sentence interrupter used to announce a series or elaborate on a previously stated idea. It can be used by writers to create an unexpected meaning or satire as a departure from the expected. The dash can convey a more casual tone.
- C. Colon - used to announce, to prepare the reader for something to come. A colon sets the expectation that important, closely related information will follow.
- D. Semicolon - used to separate different but related sentences. Instead of dividing them with a period, it implies a connection. Because it gives equal weight to two or more independent clauses in a sentence, it reinforces parallel ideas and imparts equal importance to both or all of the clauses.

V. Other Bullet Points

- short, simple sentences change the pace, add emphasis
- inverting the natural order of a sentence (subject-verb) may be done for emphasis
- an appositive phrase, another noun, set off by commas or dashes, that renames the subject can add important information about the person, place, or thing just mentioned
- prepositions can be used by good writers to interrupt or end the sentence with lively description.

